Large anti-government swing in Chilean elections

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For the first time since the return to civilian rule in 1990, the ruling "centre-left" coalition in Chile polled less than half the votes in the December 16 parliamentary elections, allowing former military dictator General Augusto Pinochet's political heirs to claim that they will return to power after the next elections.

In an election dominated by economic slowdown, mass unemployment and voter disaffection, the Concertacion government of President Ricardo Lagos obtained about 47 percent of the vote—down from 50 percent in 1997—against almost 45 percent for the right-wing Alliance for Chile. Led by the Socialist Party-Party for Democracy (PS-PPD) and the Christian Democrats (DC), the Concertacion's representation in the 120-member Chamber of Deputies fell from 70 to 63.

The Alliance for Chile gained a swing of almost 12 percentage points, up from 33 percent in 1997, repeating its near triumph in the 2000 presidential election when its candidate, Joaquin Lavin, came within 30,000 votes of defeating Lagos. The opposition coalition now holds 57 Chamber of Deputies seats and 18 of the 38 elected Senate seats (another 10 Senators are appointed).

The results indicate a political polarisation affecting both coalitions. Within the Alliance for Chile, Lavin's Independent Democratic Union (UDI), a far-right party mainly made up of Pinochet supporters, increased its share in the lower house from 17 seats to 35, displacing some MPs from its partner, the National Renovation. The UDI toppled the Christian Democrats as the largest party in terms of electoral support. "This election shows that our alliance is a real alternative government for the election four years from now," Lavin said.

All the Concertacion's losses came from the Christian Democrats, the traditional pro-business party of the middle classes and the largest single party in Chile since the 1960s. It suffered a major rout, being reduced from 38 deputies to 24, and losing two of its four Senators.

Some of its votes went to its coalition partners. The Party for Democracy, which seeks to appeal to middle class voters by advocating "progressive politics," took seats from the DC, increasing its share from 16 to 21 in the lower house and from two to three in the Senate. The Socialist Party gained a seat in the Senate, also taken from a Christian Democrat, and now has four Senators and 11 deputies. The smaller Radical-Social Democratic Party has four deputies.

These parties also benefitted from the decline of the Communist Party (PC). The PC obtained 5.2 percent in the lower house and 2.6 percent in the upper house, a fall from 5.7 percent and 7 percent respectively in the 1997 elections. The PC barely managed to retain the 5 percent required to stay legally registered—a far cry from 1969 when it won up to a third of the vote among workers, miners and peasants in key electorates.

PC leader Gladys Marin complained that the party "did not receive the support that was promised," by the PS. She had signed an electoral pact with the Socialist Party, whereby the two parties would campaign for each other's candidates. It turned out to be a one-way deal in favour of the PS. But even with the support of the PS, Marin's party would not have won a seat. Its highest constituency vote was 16.1 percent, surpassed by the UDI, which won 23 percent, and the PPD 39.5 percent.

The results point to widespread disenchantment and hostility toward the political process. According to the National Statistics Institute, while 10.1 million people were entitled to vote, only 8.08 million had registered

by the August deadline, and just 6.09 million cast valid votes. In other words, four million eligible voters did not participate.

One of the most striking features of the elections was that the far-right gained ground in impoverished areas. The UDI won three of the 12 seats and the Alliance for Chile will hold five seats altogether in the mining regions of Tarapaca, Antofagasta and Atacama, where unemployment has more than doubled in the past four years. In another mining area, Lota, where mining jobs have halved, the UDI obtained 32.3 percent of the vote.

UDI leaders declared that their aim is to win the poorest areas away from the PS and PC. A UDI leader, Marco Gonzalez, said the UDI would vie with "the left" for every vote in the "poblaciones" (shanty towns).

Over the past decade the Concertacion has pursued the interests of big business and presided over worsening poverty and social inequality. Since his election last year, Lagos—the first Socialist Party leader to govern Chile since Pinochet overthrew the reformist Salvador Allende in a 1973 CIA-sponsored military coup—has further disillusioned the working class, paving the way for the return of the most right-wing elements.

The UDI prospered under Pinochet's bloody rule, taking ministerial positions during the 1980s. For years, it denied that the military had tortured and murdered thousands of political opponents in its 17-year rule. Only several months ago, when the military admitted to having drugged and thrown political opponents out of helicopters into the ocean and the peaks of Andes, did the UDI acknowledge that these crimes had occurred, and then declared the military's victims were partly to blame. In these elections, it even ran and won a spot in the Senate for a former commander in chief of the military—Admiral Jorge Arancibia.

Despite this sordid track record, the UDI won many votes in poor areas, specifically because it claimed to have solutions to resolve the double digit unemployment levels and grinding poverty imposed on broad masses of people after the economy plunged into recession in 1998.

Lagos managed to win the presidency in 2000 with the help of the Communist Party, which provided him with the crucial "left" credentials his coalition required. The previous Christian Democrat-led administration had left office will little more than 28 percent approval ratings.

Sections of society had become radicalised by 1999, as evidenced by large demonstrations against job losses, privatisations and regional devastation, as well as in response to Pinochet's arrest in London. People were full of expectations when Lagos entered office, with his promises to create jobs, introduce a more equitable social program and mete out justice against the military.

However, upon entering government with a team of International Monetary Fund/World Bank-trained economists, Lagos quickly went to work implementing the demands of the money markets for further deregulation, decentralisation, lower corporate taxation and the removal of currency controls.

Conditions for ordinary people continued to deteriorate. Of the 300,000 jobs Lagos promised during the elections, 150,000 temporary "work for benefits" positions materialised, offset by 87,000 dismissals in the first nine months of this year. Unemployment remains in the double digits. In Lota, once a thriving regional mining city, joblessness officially stands at 20 percent. In the port city of Valparaiso, unemployment is 17.8 percent. In Concepcion, the third most populous region in Chile, unemployment is 14.9 percent.

At least 1,000 workers a day were being dismissed during September in Santiago, the capital city. Because half the country's unemployed have had no work for over a year, many are living without electricity or water, unable to pay the bills. In Santiago's shantytowns, where poverty may be as high as 70 percent, families are going without food.

With Lagos committed to satisfying the requirements of the international financiers, these conditions have allowed the far-right to make populist appeals to the victims of his policies. Immediately after the elections, Lagos signalled that his government will only shift further to the right. He invited the emboldened Alliance for Chile leaders as well as the Communist Party to join him in developing a common program.